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U. S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEHOLD CALENDAR
Quality guides in buying drapery fabrics

A radio talk by Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Monday, April 30, 1934.

MR. TEUTON: Well, Mis Van Deman, the last time you and I were on the Farm and Home Hour together, you treated us all to cherry pie? Got anything like that for us today?

MISS VAN DEMAN: No, sorry, Mr. Teuton. I just couldn't manage a cherry pie, or a strawberry short cake, or anything like that today. The Household Calendar is too full of other things right now. This is Better Homes Week, you know, and women are out to pick up all the ideas they can for improving their houses in simple inexpensive ways. Then tomorrow, May first, is Child Health Day, so designated by proclamation of the President. And Mrs. Roosevelt has promised to be our guest on the Farm and Home Hour to give a Child Health Day talk. She'll speak tomorrow at 12:45, Eastern Standard Time, from Washington. I know everybody will want to make a note of that and be listening in to hear Mrs. Roosevelt.

Now today I'm going to try to kill two birds with one stone. Many of you, I know, are gathering every scrap of information you can about labels on fabrics, that is, labels giving definite facts on color-fastness, shrinkage, and other points in wearing quality. And also many of you, I happen to know, are on the look-out right now for desirable but not-too-expensive materials for summer curtains and slip covers and cushions to dress up the old porch chairs. Well I believe this story of some very practical tests our textile people made on drapery fabrics will serve both these purposes.

One morning last week, Bess Viemont took me on a little shopping tour. She's had a lot of experience in testing fabrics in the laboratory and in using them in interior decoration, but we both wanted to see what the stores are carrying this spring and what kind of materials are most popular. Also of course we're always on the still hunt for labels about quality. We've got the habit of looking for such facts on the selvage, or on the tags attached to the bolt, or on the price signs. In the course of our shopping trip we looked at several hundred different fabrics, I suppose. But it was only on less than a dozen that we found any mention of color fastness. And on not a single one did we find a word about shrinkage. Apparently the idea of pre-shrinking cotonnes and denims and other washable materials for slip covers and curtains hasn't yet occurred to any manufacturer. Let's hope it will soon.

On just a few cotonnes, and to our surprise on some very inexpensive ones, we found selvage marks that said "Guaranteed sunfast and tub proof." One lot of very attractive materials carried just the word "Unfadeable." And we discovered one bolt of glass curtain material - an ecru not of cotton and rayon combined - with such a clear, straightforward label that I copied it down word for word. It gave the name and address of the manufacturer and read: "Our guarantee covers refund of the purchase price or replacement of yardage faded from exposure to sun or dry cleaning." Well, if that material didn't live up to its guarantee, all you'd stand to lose would be your work in making the curtains, which of course is quite enough, even at that.

(over)

Miss Viemont and I ended by buying quarter-yard lengths of about a dozen of the most popular inexpensive materials and took them back with us to the Bureau of Home Economics. There we turned them over to Margaret Furry and asked her to test them for color fastness and shrinkage.

If you've ever been through a textile-testing laboratory you've probably seen a machine for testing the color fastness of fabrics to light. It's really just a big metal cylinder with little frames fitted into it to hold samples of the fabrics. Inside is a powerful arc light, and around it in a metal cylinder are rows of little frames like windows, each one to hold a sample of the different fabrics under test. Miss Furry kept these drapery fabrics in the fading machine for about 70 hours, which is about equivalent to 15 days of direct summer sunshine. Maybe that seems a short time as compared with the months or years you expect to use a drapery fabric, but it really is a rather drastic test. For when you come to think of it, the sun doesn't shine for very long at a time directly on your curtains.

When we looked over these samples after they come out of the fading machine we found only two that had changed color badly. One was a green theatrical gauze, which turned a rather bluish shade, and the other was a blue and gold striped linen, very popular this year for slip covers. The cheap cretonnes labeled color fast did hold their color and the only change in the one marked "Unfadeable" was that the natural ecru of the background grew lighter.

Miss Furry also washed a piece of each fabric in lukewarm neutral soap suds. Again the blue and gold striped linen lost its color, but all the rest stood up very well. Especially one piece of green and brown plaid slip-cover material with a nice firm weave came out of both the light and the water test practically unchanged.

But shrinkage was quite another matter. This good sturdy plaid shrank over 2 inches a yard in the warp, that is lengthwise of the fabric, and the striped linen I spoke of a moment ago shrank about 2 inches warpwise and nearly as much crosswise. Which means of course that when you make your slip covers you'll want to put in a tuck and not fit them up too snugly, or you may not be able to get them on your chairs after the first washing.

By the way, if you'd like good directions and pictures to help you in making slip covers for furniture, write to me. We have some material I'd be glad to send you. And we can also give you help on selecting fabrics for draperies and making them into curtains that will hang true and hold their shape in the tub and under the iron. Drapery fabrics are alluring things and I know it's hard to be practical in front of a rainbow-tinted marquisette or a flowery chintz. It's like these lines I saw in a little poem the other day:

"Small prints
Of flowered chintz
Delight my city room. The great winged chair
They turn into a garden seat
Amidst the cinnamon of sweet
Old-fashioned pinks and ferns"....

But after all, if these fabrics are to hold their charm, we need to follow quality guides in selecting them.

Remember to listen for Mrs. Roosevelt on the Farm and Home Hour tomorrow. Goodbye for this time.